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Recommended Citation

Lind, Mary, "PANEL 19 THE IMPACT OF VOICE MAIL, ELECTRONIC MAIL, FACSIMILE, AND ELECTRONIC BULLETIN BOARDS ON ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE" (1989). *ICIS 1989 Proceedings*. 10.
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PANEL 19

THE IMPACT OF VOICE MAIL, ELECTRONIC MAIL, FACSIMILE, AND ELECTRONIC BULLETIN BOARDS ON ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

Panel Chair: Mary Lind, North Carolina State University

Panelists: Ron Rice, Rutgers University
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Communications channels which include both interpersonal and written communication modes are the conduits through which organizations exchange information. As Weick and many others have indicated, the exchange of information is fundamental to the act of organizing, since it allows organizational members to achieve convergence or mutual understanding in interpreting both internal and environmental information.

Organizations are investing in various types of computer mediated communication channels, including electronic mail, voice mail, facsimile, and electronic bulletin boards. Research, however, has repeatedly demonstrated managers prefer communication modes, such as the telephone and face-to-face media, that provide immediate feedback.

The focus of this panel is to discuss both the trade-offs and the impact on organizational performance of these selected computer mediated media. While all of these computer mediated communication mediums use store-and-forward communication, voice mail records verbal messages whereas the other selected media, with the exception of facsimile, record only typed messages. Facsimile can transmit images of material -- text, graphs, signatures, and pictures. Voice mail is as accessible as the nearest telephone, whereas electronic mail, bulletin boards, and facsimile currently must be accessed through terminals or fax machines. Thus, two fundamental differences between voice mail and the other media are accessibility and the type of information transmitted: printed versus verbal.

It is well documented that organizational members who engage in frequent interpersonal communication tend to be more innovative. It is not clear if the verbal information transmitted via voice mail will be as effective in promoting innovativeness as interpersonal communication. While voice mail, a store and forward medium, can not provide immediate feedback, it is extremely accessible and it does fit into the predominant mode of communication in organizations: the verbal mode of communication.

Another assumption of the information processing literature is that to enhance organizational performance there needs to be a fit between the information processing activities of individuals and the nature of their work activities. It has been shown that the information needs of those involved in highly analyzable tasks differ from those involved in tasks with a low degree of task analyzability. To be discussed for these media are the task situations which best fit, in terms of organizational performance, the information processing capabilities of each of these channels.

The participants will provide an overview of their on-going research projects regarding these communication media and their research strategies for evaluating the organizational impact of these media.